

VZCZCXR06477
OO RUEHHM
DE RUEHHI #0623/01 1870847
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 060847Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9851
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH PRIORITY 5989

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 000623

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/06/2019

TAGS: PHUM PREL VM

SUBJECT: GVN THREATENS BOYCOTT OF NATIONAL DAY OVER INVITEE

Classified by Ambassador Michael W. Michalak for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The GVN threatened to boycott Embassy Hanoi's National Day celebration at the last minute over the inclusion on the guest list of prominent dissident Pham Hong Son. The Ambassador strongly protested the incident and has followed up with a letter to Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Khiem (para 4). Ambassador has invited Dr. Son to a separate meeting to discuss the issue, and post will continue to meet with him as well as other dissidents to send a strong signal to the GVN that such strong-arm tactics will not result in fewer such contacts. End summary.

Background: Jailed for Article from Department Website

¶2. (C) Dr. Son was director of a pharmaceutical company before being arrested by the GVN authorities on March 27, 2002 for distributing and translating essays calling for democracy in Vietnam, including an article from the State Department website entitled "What is Democracy?" On June 17, 2003, he was sentenced to 13 years imprisonment for espionage, which was reduced on appeal in August 2003 to five years imprisonment and three years under house arrest. Son was detained in solitary confinement and denied access to appropriate medical treatment during his incarceration. After intense pressure from Washington and around the world, Dr. Son was released on August 30, 2006.

¶3. (C) Many senior U.S. officials including Members of Congress have since visited Dr. Son, and post remains in regular contact with him and his wife, Vu Thuy Ha. He has been invited to participate in an NED Fellowship when his house arrest status ends in August, but it is unclear whether the GVN authorities would allow him to do so although we have received a promise via diplomatic note from the MFA that once his administrative probation ends in August he would be free to obtain a passport and travel abroad. Dr. Son's Vietnamese translation of &What is Democracy8 remains posted on the Embassy's website and is regularly distributed in hard copy by the Embassy's PAS and Political Sections.

Last-Minute Threat

¶4. (C) DCM was asked about Dr. Son's attendance at the July 2 national day celebration that afternoon by MFA Americas Director General Nguyen Ba Hung. She confirmed that Son would attend, noting that he had attended other official events including Sweden's reception in honor of forty years of relations with Vietnam. Hung responded that if Son attended then all GVN attendees - including the guest of honor - would boycott the event. "There are important political meetings going on now," Hung said darkly, referring to the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee meetings then underway. Ambassador protested to Vice Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, who confirmed that if Son was present there would be no attendees from the GVN. Less than an hour before the start of the event, post contacted Dr. Son and asked if he would accept an invitation to the Ambassadors house the

next day instead to avoid a confrontation. Son said he had been visited by police that morning and they had told him to stay away so he would. The Ambassador invited Son to meet with him at his earliest convenience. The Ambassador took note of Son's situation in his remarks at the reception, thanking not only those who attended but also those who were not able to attend for their "courage and service." (Note: Many Vietnamese guests read the remarks with approval as applying to jailed HCMC lawyer Le Cong Dinh. End note.)

¶5. (C) Text of Ambassador's July 6 letter to Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Khiem:

I am writing to express my shock and outrage over your government's last-minute threat to boycott our national day celebration in Hanoi over our invitation to this event of one individual: Mr. Pham Hong Son. Mr. Son is a Vietnamese pharmacist who was jailed for translating a document from our Embassy Hanoi website into Vietnamese, but is currently under probation at his home. This status does not legally prohibit him from accepting invitations such as ours, and he has met with senior officials including Members of Congress and attended official gatherings hosted by other foreign missions in Hanoi.

We hear often from the government of Vietnam that our government pays too much attention to a small group of individuals whose views do not always reflect those of the government. By elevating the invitation of Mr. Pham Hong Son to our national day to the level of an international incident, the government of Vietnam has by definition raised

HANOI 00000623 002 OF 002

the level of attention to his case.

I firmly believe your government is strong enough to tolerate those among its citizens who do not agree with everything the government says. At a minimum, I expect those citizens - not prohibited from doing so under Vietnamese law - to be allowed to accept our mission's invitations to functions.

With a new administration in Washington, I look forward to new opportunities for constructive engagement with Vietnam. At the same time, an incident such as your government's last-minute interference with our national day guest list certainly signals a limit to the level of that engagement. Your attention to this matter is greatly appreciated.

End text

Comment: Countering New Level of GVN Interference

¶6. (C) The GVN regularly protests Mission meetings with "lawbreakers" and occasionally prevents them from taking place. Last-minute blackmail to keep an individual out of our national day celebration takes this interference to a new level, perhaps the worst since Son's wife Vu Thuy Ha was detained and manhandled by GVN authorities while attempting to meet with then-Ambassador Marine and visiting Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez in 2007. Mission Vietnam plans to push back by seeking more regular meetings with Dr. Son and others, signaling that such heavy-handed tactics will not discourage Mission contacts with these individuals. End comment

MICHALAK